

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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Editorial

Editor's Diary

On 26th March, we reached Ramnagar (6 hours taxi drive from Delhi), with the intention to spend 4 days in the Corbett Tiger Reserve. This exciting holiday was made possible by the invitation of Mr Rajiv Bhartari, Deputy Director of the C.T.R. and the generosity of Mr Dilip Khatau of the Corbett Foundation. The Foundation has been set up to assist the Forest Department in their difficult task of saving the tiger from its calamitous depletion. For example, the Foundation has taken the responsibility of compensating farmers for cattle killed by tigers immediately on hearing of a kill. Mr Akshobh Singh of the Foundation arrives at the site within the shortest

lapse of time, and arranges payment almost immediately, in case of a genuine tiger kill. This prevents the owner of the cattle killed from poisoning the carcass to take his revenge on the tiger. There have been 5 cases of tigers poisoned in this manner during the past 4 months. Without exaggeration the situation is grim.

Corbett Lodge, where we arrived on the 26th, is one of the finest places I have ever stayed in. It is sited on the bank of the Kosi river in whose clear waters we could see Mahseer and shoals of fish while having our tea in the verandah. A hundred common rose finches *Carpodacus erythrinus* exploded like fireworks from a tree overhanging the building. It was a rare sight and the birds performed for us on several occasions; a Himalayan pied kingfisher on the other side of the river was another exciting encounter.

On the 27th we went on to Dhikala (52 miles from Ramnagar). We were there till the 29th, and my daughter Shama Chowdhury, listed the birds we saw, which are reproduced in this issue. Every time you visit a Sanctuary there are some scenes which stick in your mind forever just because of their beauty. The sightings which will always be thrilling to recall were one, of a chestnut-headed bee eater high up on a Sal tree with the sun burnishing its crown. The Flame of the Forest trees *Butea monosperma* Palas in bloom, scattered around, added to the glory of the scene. Secondly it is said that waterfowl over a wetland is one of the most beautiful sights of our world, and many birdwatchers will agree with this statement. For me in Corbett the sight of 4 Brahminy duck, ruddy shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* honking overhead above the Ramganga river and displaying to perfection in the evening light their brown, cream and black plumage, is another memory which time will not erase. How so-called sportsmen derive pleasure from murdering such birds is a mystery.

On the 29th, we were back in Ramnagar where at a Conservation Centre built through local initiative, I was asked to speak on birds and also on the early years of Project Tiger when I was a member of the Steering Committee. My daughter, Zahida Whitaker, gave a talk on reptiles and showed a film on the King Cobra (by Rom Whitaker) which is a model of what natural history films should be like.

On 30th March in Delhi, I again saw, as I had reported last year at the same time, large numbers of white-backed vultures on trees on both sides of Shah Jahan road in the heart of our capital. The reason, according to some, is that large trees for roosting have vanished from the countryside so the birds roost in the city and forage in adjoining rustic areas.

On 2nd April we were in Kihim, the place about which I have written so often. The first upsetting sight was the village tank where Salim Ali did his famous observation on the bayas and which for a few years was designated as a Sanctuary. It has now been leased out for fishing, and the result is that all the vegetation and most of the birds, including the two species of jacanas, have vanished, and only the kingfishers and a few hardy species like egrets and pond herons remain. I have

written to the Village Panchayat to consider re-creating this Sanctuary in view of its potential and historical importance. I have also requested the BNHS to support this move.

On 3rd April a large congregation of common swallows was seen on a telegraph wire near the pond in the evening. The next day and afterwards there were none to be seen, so the birds had obviously left for overseas on the night of 3rd April.

7th April 98 On the road to Kankeshwar 3 little brown doves (*Streptopelia senegalensis*), a male Indian robin, and a blackwinged kite descending from high up with landing gear extended, and wings held above the body. This road passes through dry deciduous country, grasslands with acacias and a few neem trees. Just the sort of place for robins and little brown doves. How attached birds are to specific habitats. A few furlongs away, with the landscape very different, rain trees and gulmohurs predominating, these two species are unlikely to be seen.

On the beach in the evening there was a single common sandpiper and a whimbrel. As I was despairing about seeing anything more in the way of birds, I raised my binoculars to scan the top of casuarina trees lining the beach. To my surprise and pleasure, a pair of white-bellied sea eagles came into view. With the sun in the right position, I got a perfect view of their white and grey brown bodies, the aristocratic head, the alert eyes, and the powerful hooked bill. When they flew they were chased inevitably by the lowly crow tribe, but the pursuers were soon out-distanced.

21st April 98, 5.55 a.m. White-bellied sea eagles were calling for a long time. As always, I enjoyed listening to the calls of coucals (COOP, COOP COOP) and wondered whether it was possible to de-code this by the number of calls in a particular stretch. The commonest number was 1-2-3-4-5. Sometimes one more was added making 6 calls at a time. The females often responded to the 5 calls of the male by calling 4 times but softly and demurely. Occasionally the male in high spirits called 12 to 15 times but there was no response from the females. I am sure that someone with a scientific bent of mind could de-code the significance of these coucal calls. This could be an interesting pastime as there seems to be a definite pattern in the numbers involved.

23rd April. 50 school children arrived to be taken for a bird walk to the pond. Apparently Salim Ali is now a name with which the school children in the area are familiar. They came initially to see the hut in which Salim Ali spent so many years. At the pond we were of course disappointed to see nothing at all, but the children and their mentor, Mrs. Manasi Londhe have agreed to pressurise the Village Panchayat to re-create this pond. I hope the BNHS will also follow up and do what they can. Mrs. Londhe said she would persuade the children to plant Babul trees on the banks of the pond and this of course will be a very useful step, as babuls make good nesting trees for herons and egrets.

25.4.98. Common grey hornbills seen quite frequently and one was nesting in a neighbour's garden. Goldenbacked

woodpeckers have been fewer than last year. The only birds which are in plenty, apart from jungle crows, are jungle and common mynas, coppersmiths, koels, coucals, redwhiskered and redvented bulbuls a gold-mantled chloropsis possibly nesting. A solitary whimbrel and a large egret on the beach was all that one could see. Interestingly a Brahminy kite overhead seen in the very part of the beach where I used to see it last year.

During the annual trek to Kankeshwar I was disappointed not to see or hear the shama. A great deal of planting has been done by the Forest Department in Kankeshwar but contrary to the suggestions made by us last year, most of the saplings are of eucalyptus and acacia.

I was very glad to see a few ashy swallow shrikes this year, so my presumption that the fumes of the Thull Fertilizer Project (RCF) have wiped out the species as a result of air pollution is not quite correct. However, there is no doubt that the numbers have declined drastically.

This year's birdwatching in Kihim was rather limited because of a bad accident and a long illness from which I have not quite recovered. On my return to Bangalore on 29th May I found a pile of letters and articles which have remained unacknowledged and for which I wish to be forgiven. Not to delay the May/June Newsletter too much, I am picking out a few clearly typed and easy to edit articles, and will deal with the rest later.

Errata : In the March/April issue page 25/26 instead of sub family read Family.

APPENDIX

Birds seen in Corbett 26-30 March 98 by Zafar Futehally & Party

Family Accipitridae

(1) Changeable hawk eagle/crested hawk eagle *Spizaetus cirrhatus*, (2) Greyheaded fishing eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus*, (3) Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, (4) Cinereous vulture *Aegypius monachus*, (5) Shikra *Accipiter badius*, (6) Pariah kite *Milvus govinda*, (7) King vulture *Sarcogyps calvus*, (8) Pallas's fishing eagle *Haliaeetus leucoryphus*

Family Pycnonotidae

(9) Brown-eared bulbul *Hypsipetes flavalus*, (10) Black bulbul *Hypsipetes madagascariensis*, (11) Red-whiskered bulbul *Pycononotus jocosus*, (12) Red-vented bulbul *Pycononotus cafer*, (13) White-cheeked bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys*

Family Phasianidae

(14) Black partridge *Francolinus francolinus*, (15) Red junglefowl *Gallus gallus*, (16) Grey quail *Coturnix coturnix*, (17) Common peafowl *Pavo cristatus*

Family Irenidae

(18) Gold-mantled chloropsis *Chloropsis cochinchinensis*, (19) Common iora *Aegithina tiphia*

Family Charadriidae

(20) Little ringed plover *Charadrius dubius*, (21) Green shank *Tringa nebularia*, (22) Common sandpiper *Tringa hypoleucos*

Family Ardeidae

(23) Median egret *Egretta intermedia*, (24) Little egret *Egretta garzetta*, (25) Grey heron *Ardea cinerea*, (26) Paddy bird *Ardeola grayii*

Family Bucerotidae

(27) Malabar grey hornbill *Tockus griseus*, (28) Indian pied hornbill *Anthraceros malabaricus*

Family Laniidae

(29) Rufous backed shrike *Lanius schach*

Family Coraciidae

(30) Indian roller *Coracias benghalensis*

Sub-family Turdinae

(31) Pied bush chat *Saxicola caprata*, (32) Collared bush chat *Saxicola torquata*, (33) Indian robin *Saxicoloides fulicata*, (34) Magpie robin *Copsychus saularis*, (35) White-capped redstart *Chaimarornis leucocephalus*, (36) Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*, (37) Blue whistling thrush *Myiophonus caeruleus*

Family Psittacidae

(38) Alexandrine parakeet *Psittacula eupatria*, (39) Roseringed parakeet *Psittacula krameri*, (40) Blossom-headed parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala*

Family Alcedinidae

(41) Himalayan pied kingfisher *Ceryle lugubris*, (42) Lesser pied kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*, (43) White-breasted kingfisher *Halcyon smymensis*, (44) Storkbilled kingfisher (heard) *Pelargopsis capensis*, (45) Common kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

Family Columbidae

(46) Blue rock pigeon *Columba livia*, (47) Spotted dove *Streptopelia chinensis*, (48) Indian ring dove *Streptopelia decaocto*, (49) Little brown or senegal dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*, (50) Yellow-legged green pigeon *Treron phoenicoptera*

Family Campephagidae

(51) Longtailed minivet *Pericrocotus ethologus*, (52) Common woodshrike *Tephrodornis pondicerianus*

Sub-family Muscicapinae

(53) Verditer flycatcher *Muscicapa thalassina*, (54) White browed fantail flycatcher *Rhipidura aureola*

Family Burhinidae

(55) Great stone plover *Esacus magnirostris*

Family Laridae

(56) Black-headed gull *Larus ridibundus*, (57) Indian river tern *Sterna aurantia*

Family Upupidae

(58) Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Family Ploceidae Sub-family Passerinae

(59) House sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Sub-family Ploceinae

(60) Spotted Munia, Nutmeg mannikin, *Lonchura punctulata*

Family Fringillidae

(61) Common rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrurus*

Family Anatidae

(62) Ruddy shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*

Sub-family Timaliinae

(63) White-crested laughing thrush (heard) *Garrulax leucolophus*, (64) Jungle babbler *Turdoides striatus*, (65) Rusty-cheeked scimitar babbler *Pomatorhinus erythrogenys*

Family Ciconiidae

(66) Black-necked stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*

Family Dicruridae

(67) Black drongo *Dicrurus adsimilis*, (68) Ashy drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus* (69) Haircrested drongo *Dicrurus hottentottus*

Family Meropidae

(70) Chestnut headed bee-eater *Merops leschenaulti*, (71) Green bee-eater *Merops orientalis*

Family Motacillidae

(72) Large pied wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis*, (73) White wagtail *Motacilla alba*, (74) Grey wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*, (75) Tawny pipit *Anthus campestris*

Family Sturnidae

(76) Common myna *Acridotheres tristis*, (77) Grey-headed myna *Sturnus malabaricus*

Family Corvidae

(78) Jungle crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*

Family Alaudidae

(79) Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Family Recurvirostridae

(80) Black winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

Family Picidae

(81) Golden-backed woodpecker *Dinopium benghalense*

Sub-family Sylviinae (Muscicapidae)

(82) Jungle wren warbler *Prinia sylvatica*

Family Hirundinidae

(83) Common swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Family Cuculidae

(84) Crow pheasant or coucal *Centropus sinensis*

Family Zosteropidae

(85) White eye *Zosterops palpebrosa*

Family Nectariniidae

(86) Purple sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica*

Family Paridae

(87) Grey tit *Parus major*

Family Capitonidae

(88) Small (?) Green barbet *Megalaima viridis*





Encounters with birds at Dharamsala

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1. Birds were in abundance both in terms of species and in the sheer numbers; in the visual joy of birds perched, birds in flight and birds scuttling among leaves on the ground. So also in the auditory pleasure of bird song from pre-dawn to dusk; reaching a crescendo by about 8.00 A.M., diminishing gradually to a few calls and chortles late into afternoon and then again ascending to a voluble, rich repertoire by the evening. The nightjar, the owls, the ubiquitous call of the barbet, the fluid yoddlle of the cuckoo and the urgent note of the brain fever bird filtered into the twilight and on into the night till it finally merged with the pre-dawn chorus. I lived in the midst of this perfect cycle of bird life for ten full days in May 97, in the Kangra valley (H.P.)
2. It was not a birdwatching holiday as such. We had gone to visit my wife's first cousin, his wife and daughter and his mother at their ancestral, Dharamsala Tea Estate. And it so happened that I encountered birds there all the time; during early morning walks, sitting in the lawn over the morning cup of tea, accompanying our hosts on their tour of supervision through the tea gardens, visiting their friends in the country and even over sun-downers out in the open.
3. On my very first morning walk and barely two hundred yards from the house into the tea bushes, I abruptly froze in my tracks. There were five, full-blown male paradise flycatchers flying from tree to tree, giving chase to each other in playful abandon and weaving beautiful signatures in the air with rhythmic fluttering of their tail-streamers. They remained in my vision perhaps for one minute but it would be more than fifteen minutes before I fully imbibed the visual glory and resumed my walk. It was an experience of almost the spiritual plane. I had never before seen a party of five such birds. Later they were always encountered in this general area but in ones or twos, mixed parties of males and females. In fact this spot was over-looked from the house and I often saw these birds while sipping tea in the evening. The dust-jacket of the latest edition of "The Book of Indian Birds" which carries a painting of a pair of the paradise flycatchers, (based on transparency by Vivek Sinha) acquired a new fondness for all of us henceforth.
4. The birds which immobilised me for the longest periods in my walks were the cuckoo, the hawk-cuckoo and the blue throated barbet. Perched on the albizzia trees or oak or deodar they would announce their presence but remain tantalizingly camouflaged. It remained a perfect no-win game until the bird chose to move. Even though at times I followed the bird in flight, the instant it entered the foliage to alight, and before I could gather it in my vision, it melted away!
5. Our hosts were on a supervisory tour of one of their gardens. We were approaching a small stream, chattering away as only a mountain stream can, and willows growing on both its banks. The sun was hot and I was imagining the pleasure of wading through the cold water. Just then, there was the unmistakable chatter of the tree pie. A brief eye contact then a loud agitated chuckle and there she was, the yellow-beaked blue magpie. My goodluck held out, for as I followed her flight, over a ripe wheat field in the near distance, a blue jay moved into my vision, flying with its monumental leisurely wing beat. The only time I ever see the blue jay fly vigorously is during aerial dives and aerobatics in the mating season.
6. The evening tea was always laid under a grandfather walnut tree. Keeping him company is a vintage, gnarled Jacaranda, two plum trees and quite a few silver oaks which lead onto the fringe of one of the forest patches on the Estate. There was a pair of white-cheeked bulbuls raising a family. Their nest was on a beam of the verandah. Our hosts had re-arranged potted plants in the verandah to provide security and privacy to the nesting family. Like a solemn ritual we watched the parent birds feeding the babies each evening. And then one fine day the chicks were gone on their life cycle. Throughout tea-time the most voluble and constant companions were the blossom-headed parakeets. They were awfully pre-occupied raising families in the hollows of silver oaks. As though snatching a moment of rest from child-care they would often perch on the top-most foliage of the tree. And what a contrast in colours; the green leaves and glistening blossom heads against the blue of a clear, evening Himalayan sky. An exciting encounter for all of us one evening was the sudden arrival of a male yellow-backed scarlet sun-bird. It alighted on a branch of the Jacaranda directly above us, and looked intently at us. Our host had his camera with zoom telephoto lens, handy, and had great satisfaction in exposing a few frames.
7. Some encounters are indeed of a strange kind. We had driven up and beyond Mcleod Ganj, past the Dalai Lama's residence, for drinks with friends. Their house is at the base of a horse-shoe shaped mountain, the whole of it covered with a rich growth of deodar, oak and rhododendron at about 8000 ft. ASL. And all of it owned by this one lucky family! The sun had gone below the last ridge-line at least an hour earlier. As though to add to our cheer, there wafted the unmistakable, languid melody of the Himalayan whistling thrush. There he was sitting on the roof chimney, pouring his heart out in his fluty song. What on earth was he doing up there at this late hour? Our hosts confirmed that the pair nest habitually inside the chimney and have been doing so for years. Right now there was a noisy brood in the nest and the parent birds were busy hunting insects attracted to electric lights.

- Being Nature lovers the house-owners don't mind cleaning the mess from the hearth-floor every morning! The lawn we sat on is a favourite worming site with a kaleej family, early each morning.
8. A regular visitor at tea time, searching in humus, in flower beds, or rooting in a clump of thin bamboo was a pair of cinnamon brown birds. Their plumage glistened with the sun at times looking uniformly chestnut brown. They went about their business silently, hopping mostly and unmindful of our presence. They were the size of pied mynas but their mannerisms were those of babblers. Our hosts said that the locals call them "Mouse-bird". Taking that as a clue for identification they were probably rufous babblers : "the birds clamber up among bamboo clumps and scuttle away on alarm with the agility of a rat" (page 256 of the Book of Indian Birds, Centenary edition). But I wonder?
 9. The morning hour encounters were the most varied. If I did not take a walk, I joined our hosts for the morning cup of tea. It was always laid in the shadow of a giant Magnolia tree on the lawn. Its blossom was at the peak and the fragrance was heady, in more sense than one; it invariably cured my hang-over instantly. There were half a dozen Pine trees growing on the slope below, such that the canopy of some trees was at eye level as we sat for tea. It was not uncommon to see a party of upto eight scarlet minivets on these pine trees. There were grey tits, verditer flycatchers, white-browed fantailed flycatchers, purple sunbirds, blue throated barbets, king crow, drongo, blossom headed parakeet, rufous turtle doves, red-vented bulbuls, tickell's flycatchers and a niltava. One day as I shifted my focus from tree tops to the lawn there was the hoopoe with its crown fully extended digging away for worms nonchalantly. Then once, a sudden call for "Look" from our hostess pointing to the water collected below a dripping garden tap to the rufous-bellied woodpecker. On three occasions we saw a solitary white-backed vulture perched on the charred pinnacle of a pine tree killed by lightning.
 10. One day we carried picnic lunch to one of the tea gardens. This is the highest in the estate at about 5500 ft. It is believed that this was the first garden laid out by Robert Shaw around 1860. The dense forest on its upper fringe may well be over 100 years old; giant deodars, pine, oak, rhododendron, even many a tea bush left on purpose

have grown to big trees. Shaw's house fell apart in an earth-quake that devastated this area in the 30's. An open patch almost in the dead centre of the garden with three of the tallest and thickest deodars marks the spot. We sat under their shade, lunched and had fun guessing the exact spot of the numerous black partridges calling. We were literally surrounded by them and with each call and counter-call the siege appeared perfect and closing in. And we put up the white flag of surrender happily.

11. It was about 3.30 P.M. when we took the forest path. Almost at the entry point I was urged anxiously "Look! Look! there is a bird there". In a brief moment we all zeroed on the bird. All I could see through the foliage was a tiny patch of flaming orange-red as riveting of attention as the red of the swirling skirts of flamenco dancers. Out of nowhere a drab-olive, female of the species flew straight into the male, and on impact they got entangled and momentarily thrown vertically upwards a few inches. Then began a spiralling free-fall, both grappling with each other, till barely a few feet above our heads and then in one flash they disengaged and were gone. We stood silently, each absorbing this most beautiful of encounters. Who cares about the mere identity of the species; the experience was the stuff of life. Most probably it was the flame-crested tit? Whatever, it was sublime.
12. Our host's house is on a flattened patch of the spine of a ridge which forms the Western boundary of the main tea garden. The lawn faces Northwards and the outer curve of its crescent hugs the very edge of a precipice. That is where we all sat on the last evening of our visit. Right ahead was a full broad-side 120 degree panorama of the Dhauladhars. As I reclined in my chair, the line of sight moved up just where the snow met bare rock and the tossed debris at the snouts of glaciers looked like a giant Gharial. As the moon moved up, the snowy crests acquired an undefinable white luminiscence. As though made to order, a panther called from the tea bushes to our right. Another answered from the jungle to our left. The duet receded as the duo moved away from us to their rendezvous. What more can one ask of life ?

"Northwards soared the stainless ramps of huge Himal's wall",

"Lower grew the rose oakes and the great fir groves where echoed pheasant's call and panther's cry".



The plane touched land and I came out. Not far from the plane I saw a flock of common myna. I was surprised. For it was not in any Indian airport that I had landed. It was Tashkand airport! So the ubiquitous myna must have crossed

Birdwatching in Kyrgyzystan

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the Himalaya no one knows how and when. But here it was in Central Asia as nonchalant and matter-of-fact as in its Indian home.

Soon I boarded another plane to go to Alma-Ata (Almaty for short) the then capital of Kazakhstan where I was picked up by friends and motored to Bishkek (formerly called Frunze) the capital city of Kyrgyzstan. There I was to accompany an expedition to some high altitude wetlands to observe nesting birds; waders, ducks and geese, barheaded geese, in particular.

I reached Bishkek in the dead of night at 2 a.m. It was bright sun the next morning when I woke up. On the eastern horizon I saw the mighty Tien Shan rising to a height of 4 to 5 thousand metres (12 to 16 thousand feet), their snow-clad peaks luminous and clean against a background of clear, blue sky. Bishkek sits in a broad valley drained by several streams which cascade down from the snows of Tien Shan. The willows and poplars, the lush green fields of wheat, barley and alfalfa reminded me of the vale of Kashmir. Spring had begun, ice and snow had disappeared and birds had appeared followed by the inevitable bird-watcher! We spent the next two days looking at birds around Bishkek, in the countryside, in hills and on wetlands.

Bishkek is well-planned with broad streets flanked by quiet sidewalks lined with trees. Blackbirds *Turdus merula* flitted among trees and turtle doves *Streptopelia turtur* dropped down to pick up grains and grit. On the lawns hoopoes *Upupa epops* probed the ground with their long beaks while the Eurasian cuckoo's *Cuculus canorus* rhythmic call was often heard.

On the outskirts perched on telephone cables were European bee-eaters *Merops apiaster*, Eurasian rollers *Coracias garrulus* and an occasional mistle thrush *Turdus viscivorus*. Flocks of rose-coloured starlings *Sturnus roseus* whizzed past looking for nooks and crannies around villages where they would nest. Large Eurasian swifts *Apus apus* appeared suddenly sailing effortlessly on their bowed wings out of sight the next moment.

The foothills of Tien Shan are rounded and smooth, gently sloping and carpeted with verdure. Several birds greeted us as we motored up and down the gentle slopes. Cinnamon sparrows *Passer rutilans*, Eurasian goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* and green finch *Chloris chloris*, rock bunting *Emberiza cia* and redheaded bunting *Emberiza bruniceps*, pied flycatchers *Muscicapa hypoleuca*, common rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus* in bushes and kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* and common buzzard *Buteo buteo* on poles and cables.

There are several natural and man-made wetlands around Bishkek with good aquatic vegetation: Hydrilla, Potamogeton and Cyperus and bordered with Phragmites. Common terns *Sterna hirundo* quartered the space above open water, large cormorants *Phalacrocorax carbo* fished and garganey *Anas querquedula*, ferruginous duck *Aythya nyroca* and tufted duck *Aythya fuligula* rested in deeper water. Near the banks were grey herons *Ardea cinerea*, blackwinged stilts *Himantopus himantopus* and common gallinules *Gallinula chloropus*. In the Phragmites lurked little bitterns *Ixobrychus*

minutus. Overhead, on slopes around wetlands soared European pratincoles *Glareola pratincola* and black kites *Milvus migrans*.

The high-altitude lakes that we wanted to visit were Song Kul at over 3000 metres and Issyk Kul situated at about 2000 m, altitude. The former which remains frozen for 9 months of the year, is 50 km long and 10 km wide. It was known to be a favourite nesting place for a variety of waterfowl. To reach it we crossed the Tien Shan range south of Bishkek and went up a steep, zigzag path through pine and birch to arrive at a seemingly limitless, open alpine pasture at an altitude of 3100 metres. Mountains 4000 to 4500 metres high ranged on all sides to cover the distant horizons. The land sloped gently towards the centre where a broad, gleaming sheet of fresh water formed the lake. On the way up we found a nesting pair of lesser kestrel *Falco naumanni*, saw several black-billed magpies *Pica pica*, hill pigeons *Columba rupestris*, red-billed choughs *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* and ruddy shelducks *Tadorna ferruginea* on mountain tarns.

We had to pitch tents in the open as no cover of either vegetation or topographical features was available. Here for a week we were buffeted by icy winds and blizzards, rain, hail and storms. Yet it was a life-time's experience to come to see how birds live and nest in this difficult, windswept landscape.

I was reminded of Ladakh as I saw the familiar Ranunculus and Potentilla, Astragalus and Caragana around our camp. In the little puddles and ponds around the lake grew familiar aquatic vegetation such as Potamogeton and Myriophyllum, Limnophyllum and Marselia. There were several holes around our tents which were occupied by marmots and voles who would come out early morning and at dusk when their enemies - eagles, buzzards and foxes were not around. In the afternoon when everything was quiet on the camp, a marmot would often pop out of his hole to look inquisitively at our tents and equipment. Horned *Eremophyla alpestris* and calandra larks *Melanocorypha calandra* were around too.

The nesting birds occupied small islands and floating rafts of vegetation on the lake. The colonially-nesting blackheaded gull *Larus ridibundus* outnumbered others. In the second week of June many had chicks which scampered and hid among sedges as we approached these islands in inflatable rubber boats. There were nests of great crested grebes *Podiceps cristatus* and common terns, while only 10 nests of barheaded geese *Anser indicus* could be found. The nests were shallow hollows on the ground lined with grass. The clutch varied from 2 to 7 eggs, 4 being the more common number. A greylag *Anser anser* pair was also seen nesting. There were several barheads around whose number easily came to 60 but only a few appeared to be successful in nesting. Shortage of safe nesting places like islands seemed to be the main reason why so many barheads could not nest.

Nests of blacktailed godwit *Limosa limosa*, blacknecked grebes *Podiceps nigricollis* were scattered on islands and concealed in vegetation around puddles on the shore. Snipes

and redshanks *Tringa totanus* also nested in ground vegetation. Tufted and ferruginous ducks, gadwalls *Anas strepera* and red-crested pochards *Netta rufina* nests with as many as 10 to 20 eggs were well concealed in steeply sloping banks of the lake.

In our forays in the big, open grasslands we once came upon a pair of demoiselle crane *Anthropoides virgo*, mute swans *Cygnus olor* in far corners of the lake, a pair of black storks *Ciconia nigra*, a lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus* and towards the western end of the lake many ruddy shelducks and lesser and greater sandpipers *Charadrius mongolus* and *leschenaultii*. Often a raven *Corvus corax* flew by and often we disturbed merlins *Falco columbarius* perched on little mounds in the grass.

Lake Issyk Kul at a lower altitude, is almost an inland sea. It is 170 km long, 60 km wide and 700 metres deep. Earth movements caused this great depression which was later filled with water from the streams flowing from the surrounding

mountains. 44 streams large and small, feed it. The water retains its fresh character though the lake appears land-locked. Settlements surround Issyk Kul though the population is small. Many parts of its banks are protected reserves. We found the birds concentrated at its eastern end which is almost a flat grassland with bays and inlets and small islands near the banks. There were more than 200 mute swans and over a 1000 ruddy shelducks, shovellers *Anas clypeata*, wigeons *Anas penelope*, mallards *Anas platyrhynchos* and numerous waders could be seen also. A small flock of demoiselle crane was resting on the bank. Big crane flocks stage here in the fall season on their southward migration, we were told. I was surprised to find that this part of the lake so rich in birds, was not included in any reserve.

As we left Issyk Kul and neared Bishkek a flock of common myna raced our vehicles. They perhaps came to remind me that I must soon return home.



Bird species at Tuticorin - Thermal camp II and SagarSadam - during Winter months

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The account of the birds seen and heard by the Thermal Camp II in June 1996 [Wesley, 1996] was a calendar of fifty species of which one was of doubtful identity, the wood owl; the spotted owl *Athene brama* and the oriental sky lark *Alauda gulgula* had been inadvertently omitted. I was again at Tuticorin for about a fortnight from 27 September 1996 to 12 October 1996, and later from 2 to 11 January 1997. I covered the area of my June visit, and the beach farther south, the salt pans and the Bird sanctuary by the Sagar Sadam of Spic besides. The present account is only of the birds of my second and third visits, with the maximum of each bird kind noted in bracket against the names. Although uncertain about its status the Alpine swift is again listed. The house swift was not observed at all during these visits.

During the winter months, I went a few kilometers farther south on the beach to discover that at high tide water flowed over a sandbar inland inundating marshy 'creeks', the intermittent elevated areas overgrown with succulent vegetation making it an ideal place for marsh birds and waders. Taking a path along which tractors and lorries transported sea-sand to the salt pans being re-laid with sand, the bottom scrapped off, and walking on the bunds I observed birds in the live and dry salt pans; reached the bird sanctuary, a very small rectangular water body with a maximum depth of a meter or so. On its eastern side for half its length is the high wall of Sagar Sadam. Along the other half and its northern side a few rows of prosopis keep the water body from being exposed to the outside world.

The sanctuary can be reached also by the main entrance to Sagar Sadam on the main road leading via the Thermal Camp II to the Tiruchendur Road. Four boards, the biggest at the entrance announcing the sanctuary; another, half its size with the caricature of a flamingo at the north-west corner of the water body, prohibiting shooting; a third near the Sagar Sadam forbidding the use of horns for the birds; and the fourth with instructions (?) entirely faded away, all for such a small self-proclaimed sanctuary, speak for the seriousness of the protectors of the birds visiting the area.

On 27 September 96 the ground surface in general at Tuticorin was wet and the air humid. It remained so through October 96 having had rains also on 8th and 10th during my stay. On the contrary, dryness prevailed during my third visit. In the Bird Sanctuary, however, there was water to full capacity leaving no exposed bank during January 97, the sea water filling it during high tides. Rain water contribution to it was insignificant.

Avifauna :

Not all birds observed during October 96 and January 97 and listed here were migratory. A few of them must be local residents such as nos. 7, 8, 43, 48, 50 that perform timely local movements.

1. Gadwall *Anas strepera* (8) Quite sensitive to being followed, it often shifted position on the wing; recorded only on 9 January'97.

2. Common teal *Anas crecca* (15) Observed on 8 October '96, they were swimming in single file occasionally upending among the grasses.

3. Pintail *Anas acuta* (27) Three of them were in male plumage. They were observed either swimming in the open water or upending among the grass. Only six ducks remained till January '97.

4. Garganey *Anas querquedula* (98) Among the ducks, the largest number counted was of this duck on 3 January '97 and at least 11 ducks remained on 11th.

5. Northern shoveller *Anas clypeata* (8) Quite wary of the humans, it took to the wings to land in the middle of the water body. Foraged in the open water and among the grasses.

6. Common pochard *Aythya ferina* (4) Of the four birds observed on 11 January '97 one was a drake. Its occurrence in the far south is interesting in as much as its distribution is known to be southward to Karnataka and Pondicherry. I have recorded its yearly occurrence in Tiruchirapalli district.

7. Indian roller *Coracias benghalensis* Not recorded in June '96, a pair had moved into the area of the prosopis. They were, however, not observed during January '97.

8. Pied kingfisher *Ceryle rudis* Four birds, two at a time, hovered over the sea to fish beyond the surf. A lone bird was in the sanctuary, perched on a tree in the middle of the waterbody. In January '97 none were seen around.

9. Blue-tailed bee-eater *Merops philippinus* A very commonly seen bee-eater during the winter, sitting on tree tops, barren twigs, or on the beach stones and stumps, hawking insects. Both adults with tail-pins and sub-adults without them were mingled.

10. Drongo cuckoo *Surniculus lugubris* A silent drongo-like bird black and sleek sitting in a neem tree, took to the wings over the camp wall as I approached it within 3 meters of it.

11. Alpine swift *Apus melba* Sixteen birds in three sets of 6 or less birds with an interval of an hour between them on 30 September '96, entered the Camp II from a northerly direction and advanced south-southwest as did those of June '96.

12. Spotted red shank *Tringa erythropus* (25) About the size of a partridge, the bird was standing in the water, head down and the rump up. Either singly or in groups there were 27 birds counted on 9, 11 January '97. Only two birds remained on the second day.

13. Common red shank *Tringa totanus* (18) It was recorded in the sanctuary during my second visit, on 8 October '96. A total of 32 birds were counted till 11 January '97. On the last day 60 birds were going north over the water, forming a 'V' that progressively flattened.

14. Marsh sandpiper - *Tringa stagnatilis* (1) Single birds were recorded from the sanctuary on 2 October '96 and 4 January '97.

15. Common green shank - *Tringa nebularis* (30) Single birds in isolated puddles, or in batches in the sanctuary were registered in October '96 and January '97, the maximum of 30 birds counted on the latter visit. About 500 birds flew high over head going northward, calling as they did *tiu tiu, tiutiu*, it may have been a jumble of different shanks.

16. Green sandpiper - *Tringa ochropus* (2). A bird very frequently on the wing uttering the characteristic *tetwi...* and while settling down, a *ti.ti.ti.ti* note, was found singly, or clashing with another.

17. Wood sandpiper - *Tringa glareola* (12). Birds had arrived at Tuticorin as early as the first week of October '96 and were recorded also in January '97.

18. Common sandpiper - *Tringa hypoleucos*. A plump bird that loves to be alone occurs widely scattered on any exposed wet ground. Only

three birds were counted within the sanctuary, another two outside it in wayside puddles.

19. Sanderling - *Calidris alba* (3). Only three birds were observed on 11 January '97 in the company of the little stints, joining some of the latter and plovers in the cool bath by the sandbar. Soon they took off for the wave beaten beach to run in their unforgettable athletic sprint, ploughing literally with the bill through the sand before it got consolidated and settled as the waves retreated, in a way resembling a batsman running with the bat pushed along the ground towards the wicket. The bird was filtering microorganism and did not pick them up on the beach like the plovers did.

20. Little Stint - *Calidris minuta* (250+). A total of 272 + birds made up by 20 birds on 4th and 250 + on 11 January '97 were counted from the marshy creek.

21. Temminck's stint - *Calidris temminckii* (30). Thirty birds were counted on 8 January '97 in the company of the above species.

22. Rednecked phalarope - *Phalaropus lobatus* (18). Twenty one birds, 3 on 3 October '96 and 18 on 3 January '97 were recorded from the sanctuary. Very wary, they took to wings on my approach. The white base of the tail was split in half by a median black stripe. They were in winter plumage.

23. Painted snipe - *Rostratula benghalensis*. Female painted snipe were calling at 1805h on 9 October '96, at 0540h and 2125h on 11th and at 1802h on 12th from the prosopis area behind the camp II. A maximum of two birds were calling in sequence or at the same time.

24. Black-winged stilt - *Himantopus himantopus* (21). Very few birds, single or twos, were seen in October '96 in isolated puddles. In the sanctuary the maximum number observed was 21 on 9 January '97. None remained there after.

25. Grey plover - *Pluvialis squatarola* (12). Not recorded in October '96. Twelve birds, a mixture of those in winter and summer plumages, were counted on the sanctuary on 3 January '97. Two birds in winter plumage, presumably a pair, showed the black 'armpit' distinct in flight by the sandbar.

26. Little ringed plover - *Charadrius dubius* (14). A total of 43 birds was counted for all the days between 30 September '96 and 11 January '97, on the beach and salt pans. Mostly juveniles with varying plumage and ring, they chose to be on the dry ground, scuttling about on yellow legs.

27. Kentish plover - *Charadrius alexandrinus* (150+). Observed during both visits, the total number of birds recorded was 472.

28. Greater plover - *Charadrius leschenaultii* (70). Mostly in winter plumage with short black bill and standing full height on black-green legs, they were either alone or mingled with the previous species. I have an inkling that the plovers recorded in June '96 may have been a pair of this kind.

29. Mongolian sand plover - *Charadrius mongolus*. Among the company of the previous species were also found individuals of the Mongolian sand pipers distinguishable by the nature of the bill, legs and the plumage at the breast, while at rest.

30. Brown headed gull - *Larus brunnicephalus*. Only two birds in winter plumage were floating on the sanctuary water. On another day a bird was flying over the camp II towards the sea.

31. Gull-billed tern - *Gelochelidon nilotica*. Apart from two birds moving together on 8, January '97, only single birds were present scattered totalling five birds.

32. Common tern - *Sterna hirundo*?. Single birds were observed during both visits. They seemed occasionally to skim the water as they went south.

33. Pallid harrier - *Circus macrourus*. A female bird with distinct white rump, barred square tail, lighter upper wing coverts and the chin and abdomen rusty brown buff was recorded on 30 September '96. On 1 October a black-and-white male bird disturbed an adult female koel from a prosopis sending her helter skelter, and alighted on a stone at a puddle.

34. Booted eagle - *Hieraaetus pennatus*. A kite-sized bird sailing over the prosopis area descended shooting down as if to land, the legs dropping like the wheels of a plane, and ascended without landing at all. The wings had dark ash with middle narrow light buff, the trailing edges and tail tip white that glittered in the sun. The underwing coverts were entirely white with black remiges shaping the wings.

35. Changeable hawk-eagle - *Spizaetus cirrhatus*. By about 0930h on 8 October '96 a bird was sailing high over the Spic, the plumage pattern on the undersurface characteristic - dark and light areas with the tail having a sub-terminal band in addition to other but faint ones. It glided far north over camp II and beyond; may have been an immature bird.

36. Great egret - *Egretta abla* (2). Full grown and magnificent, these birds foraged isolating themselves to a certain spot in the water. Unless much disturbed, they only waded away to safe distance.

37. Intermediate egret - *Egretta intermedia* (13). Some of them were in breeding condition in the bill colour and plumage, the number fluctuated with 5-7 birds shifting places perhaps between this and other unknown water bodies.

38. Black crowned night heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* (5) They were not observed at the sancturay. Only juvenile birds were seen flying in tandem early morning on 3 October '96. On 9 October a few were heard flying over the houses for night feeding.

39. Great flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* (230+) On 12 October '96 two birds, one large and the other half its size, were flying sky-high in a southerly direction. Later on 3,4,9 and 11 January '97 more than 230 birds were feeding or standing preening/sleeping in the sanctuary water. Large birds about 4 feet tall were out numbered by small ones about half their height. In both, the terminal bent portion of the bill was black. The variation in the basal portion in both was that in some it was pinkish while in others, white. The legs were correspondingly varied in the colouration.

40. Painted stork *Mycteria leucocephala* (1) A lone stork was standing in the water. Abruptly it rose and lifted high-up as did the single spotted pelican and disappeared, never to return.

41. Brown shrike *Lanius cristatus* At least seven birds were there, judging from sequence and direction of the calls.

42. Baybacked shrike *Lanius vittatus* Only one bird was recorded on 4 January '97 for the entire period of observation.

43. Jungle crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* A single individual on the house-top was being followed and harassed physically by a house crow at 6010 h on 30 September '96. On 5 October there were a pair on another house top. None were observed during January '97.

44. Eurasian golden oriole *Oriolus oriolus kundoo* Recorded a bird on 11 October '96; another male was observed on 8th January '97, affecting the large density foliaged trees, occasionally uttering a Tcheee....

45. Asian paradise flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi* At least five birds were heard in October'96. Only female birds were seen during two visits both in the camp II and outside it and the sanctuary.

46. Asian brown flycatcher *Muscicapa latirostris* Two birds were recorded in October '96 and none during January'97.

47. Red breasted flycatcher *Muscicapa parva* A lone bird that resembled the above species sitting on a low neem twig had white in the lateral rectrix. In view of its known restricted range south to Karnataka, it needs verification.

48. Oriental magpie robin *Copsychus saularis* A single male bird was registered only on 10 October '96.

49. Chestnut tailed starling *Sturnus malabaricus* About the size of the following species, there arrived 8-10 birds whose flight, attitude and bill suggested similarity to the chestnut tailed starling. The exact plumage pattern could not be ascertained because of the bright sun.

50. Brahminy starling *Sturnus pagodarum* A bird overflew the camp II on 6 October'96. Following it, on 9 October a juvenile with a crown not yet black was going about as if in search of missing siblings. Later two adult birds were recorded from the sipc area.

51. Rosy starling *Sturnus roseus* At 0750 h on October'96 three myna sized birds with ashy black head and wings, reddish brown body - dorsally and ventrally-landed on the prosopises. I could not record the colours of the tail, bill and legs. Again at 0620 h the following day a total of 28 juveniles of the species arrived from the southerly direction only to fly off north as had the previous ones.

52. Barn swallow *Hirundo rustica* The swallows seemed to come to Tuticorin from south-westerly direction, trickling in ones, twos and so on; beginning in the early morning the number increased enormously by the hundred by evening. In a moment they were all gone by 1800 h. Did they go over the sea east or north?

53. Red-rumped swallow *Hirundo daurica* The swallow congregation over Tuticorin contained a small percentage of the red rumped swallows. In January '97, I observed them sitting on beach sand. Among those on the wing I identified a still smaller percentage of those with white rumps, another sub species - *H.d. rufula*.

54. Blyth's reed warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum* Recorded only in January '97, it was heard and seen both within camp II and outside it, including the sanctuary.

55. Greenish leaf warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides* Widely scattered individuals went about through the dense foliage of the vegetation, preferring tall trees.

56. Forest wagtail *Dendronanthus indicus* At 1110 hr on 10 October'96 four birds were foraging on the wet grass-covered ground below neem trees within the Camp II. On the two following days more birds were heard overhead flying south, calling discrete : Ting, Ting as did the single individuals down below. When disturbed, individuals hopped on to horizontal branches of the nearby trees [hence the names?] and remained either motionless or walked along it as they would on the ground.

57. White wagtail *Motacilla alba* I came across this only during January'97. Six of them were counted, two of them wearing a solid black bib.

58. Yellow-hooded wagtail *Motacilla citreola* Two birds were recorded from puddles behind the camp site.

59. Yellow wagtail *Motacilla flava* First observed on 8 October'96, the birds occurred singly or in pairs scattered in the grass in the waterbody, and on the beach. Among the total of eleven birds counted two were black headed sub-species.

60. Grey wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* The first to arrive at any place, the birds were met with on any wet ground during the winter months. Only four birds affected the sanctuary in October and, together with those on the other areas including the beach, there were nine during January'97.

61. Richard's pipit *Anthus richardi* More numerous than the resident paddy field pipit and common among the grass on the sandy seashore only during January'97, they rose up in batches of 5-6 birds as I walked along, and landed a little ahead of me. They seemed darker, taller and a little stouter than the local ones.

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the observations comfortably, my son for making the computer print of the manuscript.

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Kolli Hills : A Little Known Endemic Bird Area in Southern India

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Six years ago, the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP, now Birdlife International) published a document titled "Putting Biodiversity on the Map: Priority Areas for Global Conservation" (Bibby *et al.*, 1992). This document suggests that areas rich in endemic birds are also those which have high conservation value when biodiversity is generally considered. Such areas came to be known as "Endemic Bird Areas" (EBA).

In India, the Western Ghats is one of the globally identified EBAs. However, the small map provided on page 35 of the ICBP document seems to extend the limits of the Western Ghats to include the western limits of the Eastern Ghats as well. If taken as such, a number of hills running beyond the eastern part of the Western Ghats would together comprise the EBA classified as "Western Ghats".

One set of hills, although treated as part of the Eastern Ghats, yet has a lot in common with the Western Ghats, is the Kolli Hills. This landscape lies, as the crow flies, 50 km southeast of Salem town and just west of the Pachchamalai Hills. It comprises of a range of cool and dry hills varying in altitude from 300-1550 m ASL. To a large extent the area is steep and rocky, the bases being covered with fairly dense deciduous forests. The forests above 1000 m that we see on the slopes and valleys are however unique — popularly called 'sholas', quite resembling the high elevation and montane forests of the Western Ghats. Considering the annual average rainfall of 800-900 mm in Kolli Hills, the sholas are certainly to be treated as the most fragile element in this sprawling hilly landscape. Other major elements in the landscape are occasional perennial streams, rice cultivation in the valleys, barren and rocky fallows, mixed orchards predominantly consisting of jack trees, monocultures of bananas, eucalyptus, pine and silver oak and a variety of crops including pineapple, tapioca and millets. Scattered villages and hamlets together support a more or less resident human population of around 30,000.

Seventy seven species of birds, including certain migrants, have been identified by us in this landscape during the past 4 years after about 6 visits (see full list at the end of article). Considering the vast area of over 200 sq. km, this number seems too small. In fact, in certain parts of the Western Ghats, 60-75 species of birds can be listed in a couple of hours! What emerges is that the avifauna of Kolli Hills is depauperate - several species that one might expect to find being generally scarce or absent.

What is most interesting, nevertheless, about the avifauna of Kolli Hills is that there are the following broad components.

- hill/forest birds shared between the Western and Eastern Ghats and the Himalayas and/or Sri Lanka as the black eagle, greater flameback, bronzed drongo and yellow browed bulbul;
- birds endemic to peninsular India as the grey junglefowl, painted spurfowl, whitecheeked barbet and yellowthroated bulbul;
- birds considered as endemic to Western Ghats as the Malabar parakeet and Malabar whistling thrush (the latter is patchily known outside its range in Orissa, Andhra and Bangalore);
- and an assortment of commoner birds.

Such a pattern of bird assemblage may be seen in other hills of peninsular India too. However, the occurrence of Malabar parakeet in Kolli Hills is remarkable. There are no records of occurrence of the species in the Eastern Ghats till date (Ali and Ripley, 1983; Daniels, 1997). Although we have not sighted the yellowthroated bulbul in Kolli Hills, its reported occurrence (S Subramanyam Pers. Comm) and the occurrence of birds with comparatively small geographical ranges and narrow habitat preference such as painted spurfowl, Malabar thrush and yellowbrowed bulbul in this landscape enriches the avifauna.

It can be speculated that Kolli Hills shared many more birds with the humid Western Ghats both in the recent and geological past. Human interference in the landscape leading to loss of habitat has definitely played a role in moulding the depauperate avifauna that we see today. We say this without ignoring the fact that patterns of climate change over historical times and altitude have also played a role in determining the size and composition of the avifauna. The above birds currently exist in rather small populations suggesting that if the trend of habitat loss continued, even these species may soon go extinct in the landscape. Five species of birds with restricted ranges and habitat preference in a small avifauna of less than 100 resident species is sizeable to consider the Kolli Hills as part of the Endemic Bird Areas globally recognised.

Acknowledgement

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Preliminary list of Birds of Kolli Hills

1	Blackwinged kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>
2	Oriental honey buzzard	<i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>
3	Shikra	<i>Accipiter badius</i>
4	Black eagle	<i>Ictinaetus malayensis</i>
5	Crested serpent eagle	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>
6	Painted spurfowl	<i>Galloperdix lunulata</i>
7	Grey junglefowl	<i>Gallus sonneratii</i>
8	Whitebreasted waterhen	<i>Amauornis phoenicurus</i>
9	Redwattled lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>
10	? Yellowfooted green pigeon	<i>Treron phoenicoptera</i>
11	Plumheaded parakeet	<i>Psittacula cyanocephala</i>
12	Malabar parakeet	<i>Psittacula columboides</i>
13	Common hawk-cuckoo	<i>Cuculus varius</i>
14	Asian koel	<i>Eudynamis scolopacea</i>
15	Bluefaced malkoha	<i>Phaenicophaeus viridirostris</i>
16	Greater coucal	<i>Centropus sinensis</i>
17	Jungle owlet	<i>Glaucidium radiatum</i>
18	Spotted owlet	<i>Athene brama</i>
19	Grey nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus indicus</i>

20	Largetailed nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus macrurus</i>
21	Little swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>
22	Asian palm swift	<i>Cypsiurus balasiensis</i>
23	Pied kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>
24	Whitethroated kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smymensis</i>
25	Little green bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>
26	European hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>
27	Whitecheeked barbet	<i>Megalaima viridis</i>
28	Coppersmith barbet	<i>Megalaima haemacephala</i>
29	Blackrumped flameback	<i>Dinopium benghalense</i>
30	? Heartspotted woodpecker	<i>Hemicircus canente</i>
31	Greater flameback	<i>Chrysocolaptes lucidus</i>
32	Indian pitta	<i>Pitta brachyura</i>
33	Redrumped swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>
34	Longtailed shrike	<i>Lanius schach</i>
35	Brown shrike	<i>Lanius cristatus</i>
36	European golden oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>
37	Black drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>
38	Ashy drongo	<i>Dicrurus leucophaeus</i>
39	Bronzed drongo	<i>Dicrurus aeneus</i>
40	Ashy wood swallow	<i>Artamus fuscus</i>
41	Common myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
42	Jungle myna	<i>Acridotheres fuscus</i>
43	Rufous tree pie	<i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>
44	House crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>
45	Largebilled crow	<i>Corvus macrohynchos</i>
46	Large cuckoo-shrike	<i>Coracina macei</i>
47	Scarlet minivet	<i>Pericrocotus flammeus</i>
48	Small minivet	<i>Pericrocotus cinnamomeus</i>
49	Common iora	<i>Aegithina tiphia</i>
50	Bluewinged leafbird	<i>Chloropsis cochinchinensis</i>
51	Redwhiskered bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus jocosus</i>
52	Redvented bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>
53	Whitebrowed bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus luteolus</i>
54	Yellowbrowed bulbul	<i>Iole indica</i>
55	Puffthroated babbler	<i>Pellorneum ruficeps</i>
56	Indian scimitar babbler	<i>Pomatorhinus horsfieldii</i>
57	? Tawnybellied babbler	<i>Dumetia hyperythra</i>
58	Jungle babbler	<i>Turdoides striatus</i>
59	Yellowbilled babbler	<i>Turdoides affinis</i>
60	Browncheeked fulvetta	<i>Alcippe poioicephala</i>
61	Asian brown flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa daurica</i>
62	Redbreasted flycatcher	<i>Ficedula parva</i>
63	Asian paradise flycatcher	<i>Tersiphone paradisi</i>
64	Blacknaped monarch	<i>Hypothymis azurea</i>
65	Blyth's reed warbler	<i>Acrocephalus dumetorum</i>
66	Greenish warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochiloides</i>

67	Oriental magpie robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>	74	Oriental white-eye	<i>Zosterops palpebrosa</i>
68	Malabar whistling thrush	<i>Myiophonus horsfieldii</i>	75	Whiterumped munia	<i>Lonchura striata</i>
69	Orangeheaded thrush	<i>Zoothera citrina</i>	76	Blackthroated munia	<i>Lonchura kelaarti</i>
70	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla capsica</i>	77	Common rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i>
71	Palebilled flowerpecker	<i>Dicaeum erythrorhynchos</i>			
72	Plain flowerpecker	<i>Dicaeum concolor</i>			
73	Longbilled sunbird	<i>Nectarinia lotenia</i>			

Note : Names after Daniels (1997): '?' indicates unconfirmed sightings/calls heard



Research Synopsis -

The Ability of Wintering Waders to Compensate for Lost Feeding Time

ABDUL JAMIL URFI, Sundarvan nature Discovery Centre, Jodhpur Tekra, Satellite Road, Ahmedabad 380 015

[The author spent two years on a post-doctoral assignment at the Furzebrook Research Station (NERC) Institute of Terrestrial Ecology, UK, working with the well known wader ecologist Dr Goss-Custard. This article is extracted from his paper on wintering Oystercatchers, entitled: AJ Urfi, JD Goss-Custard and SEA Le V. Dit Durrel (1996) The ability of Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus* to compensate for lost feeding time: field studies on individually marked birds. *Journal of Applied Ecology* : 33: 873-883].

Introduction

For their size, shorebirds have relatively high energy demands, these probably being linked to the open nature of the terrain and the consequent absence of protection from chilling winds and the resulting need to be able to mobilize energy reserves extremely rapidly. To survive and be able successfully to migrate in spring to the breeding grounds and arrive in good condition, wintering shorebirds must achieve a certain minimum rate of food intake to maintain condition. Yet they must also spend time on other essential activities; for example, feather maintenance and fighting to increase their dominance rank to help them acquire food more easily in the future. We might therefore expect birds normally to forage at the maximum rate to allow as much time as possible to be devoted to these other essential activities. On the other hand, the need while searching to simultaneously attend to a number of risks might often prevent shorebirds from feeding at maximal rates. In overwintering oystercatchers for instance, these risks include possible attacks by predators and by kleptoparasites of their own or different species, damaging the bill by hammering bivalves too vigorously, or stabbing into them too hastily, and the need to avoid prey containing many parasites. The need to attend to such risks might cause oystercatchers to feed at a rate below that which their feeding adaptations would actually allow them to achieve.

Conservationists often express concern when human activity occurs in the intertidal zone where wintering shorebirds feed. The fear is that already hard-pressed birds

might find it even more difficult, and so either emigrate or lose condition and die. However, shorebird survival rates throughout their stay in north-west Europe are generally high, except sometimes during periods of extremely severe weather. This implies that there is some 'slack' in the system which could allow many birds to adapt successfully to periods of poor feeding conditions.

When disturbed on the intertidal flats by raptorial predators and people engaged in various commercial and recreational activities, shorebirds leave their chosen feeding areas. Not only will this increase energy demands and remove feeding time, it may also force them to feed in poorer places. Whether this affects the birds may depend on whether they can compensate by increasing their rate of food intake. Based on the experimental work of Swennen *et al.*, (1989), this work tests the hypothesis that individual oystercatchers in the wild normally forage at below maximum rates, and so can compensate for lost foraging time and increased energy costs by increasing their intake rate.

Methods

Intake Rates

The intake rates of five individually colour-marked oystercatchers over 5-min periods were measured from August 1993 to March 1994 using a x 15 60 mm Zoom telescope by direct observation from canvas hides placed on 4-m high scaffolding towers on the Exe estuary, south-west England. These were entered by boat on the receding tide before the birds arrived. The lengths of mussels taken by the birds were estimated by comparison with bill length and later adjusted for individual observer bias.

As intake rate in oystercatchers can be affected by interference the study areas were marked out in 25 x 25 m squares to measure oystercatcher density where the subject was feeding.

Studies on Individually Marked Birds

The foraging activities of individuals were continuously recorded into a tape recorder for as long as possible over the exposure period. The observation period started at the time a bird was sighted on the mussel bed after it had exposed and ended when the bird flew off to the high water roost before the bed covered. Later, the data were transcribed to give a continuous activity record, divided into consecutive 5 min periods. In each 5 min the number of seconds spent actively foraging was recorded along with the number and sizes of the mussels taken. The remaining time, if any, was ascribed to preening or resting or being alert. Intake rates were calculated only for 5 min periods during which most of the time (>290s) was spent on active foraging.

Disturbance Experiments

Whether disturbed naturally by a hunting peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*, by fishermen or experimentally by one of our research team, the birds usually left the mussel bed to roost on a nearby sand bank. An experimental disturbance was made by one of us walking on to the mussel bed on a pre-arranged signal and driving all the oystercatchers from the bed. Individuals that had been watched before the disturbance could usually be relocated afterwards, allowing intake rates before and after the disturbance to be compared. The experimental disturbances were carried out just before dead low water; if carried out later in the tidal cycle, many birds did not return to the mussel bed that day.

Analysis Procedure

It was necessary to distinguish between any increase in intake rate following a disturbance from any increase that always occurred at that stage in the exposure period. Establishing how intake rates changed through the exposure period in the absence of disturbance was done by regressing intake rates on wholly undisturbed days or before the first disturbance had occurred on the remaining days, against the stage of the exposure period, expressed as a fraction (FRACT) of the total. This was done in the linear, and in squared and quadratic forms to allow for nonlinearity. Other environmental variables were also included in the regression analysis.

Habituation to Disturbance

Under frequent disturbance, oystercatchers might become habituated to people. Their response to a standard disturbance stimulus in three areas with contrasting levels of human activity was measured as the distance at which birds flew up when approached by a person walking towards them at a steady rate. Using a triangular, 1 m long pacing stick, we measured the distance from the position of the observer when the birds flew up to the position of the birds themselves. The most disturbed site was Exmouth beach, where many people walk dogs. The next most disturbed site was the mussel beds 3 and 4, where people often collect winkles *Littorina* spp. The least disturbed site was the mussel bed 20, where, usually, little disturbance occurs from people.

Discussion

The results from this study do not suggest that oystercatchers increased their intake rates to compensate for time and energy lost from disturbance — as a matter of fact, to compensate for lost feeding time they seem to feed longer, as is apparent from the cumulative consumption curves. This contrasts with the findings of Swennen *et al.*, who showed that captive oystercatchers were able to increase their intake rates to compensate for reduced feeding time. There are several explanations for this difference and these are discussed in detail in the paper by Urfi, *et al.* cited above. Habituation to disturbance occurs as is evident from the 'reactive distance' data shown in the Table.

Table : The mean distance in meters at which oystercatchers took flight from the source of a disturbance in three sites. Exmouth beach was the most frequently disturbed site and bed 20 the least. The sample sizes are also shown

Site name	Mean	SD	n
Bed 20	48.15	10.34	27
Beds 3 and 4	40.73	11.40	33
Exmouth beach	25.70	6.72	23

Policy Implication

The policy implication of the results are that disturbance should not necessarily be regarded as always being deleterious to the shorebirds. Up to a certain limit, the birds do have an ability to compensate. If further research suggests that waders can also compensate by feeding more at night, this conclusion would be further strengthened. However, the birds have less opportunity to compensate when they are already feeding for most of the time, as often happens in shorebirds during cold weather in winter, for example. The present study provides no evidence to suggest that, in such conditions, the birds could simply increase their intake rate without incurring additional risk. Rather, it would be safer to assume that the birds only adapt to disturbance by extending their feeding period or, as our study also showed, by reducing their sensitivity to the disturbance. It is in circumstances in which neither option seems open to the birds that policies to minimize disturbance would be most appropriate; for example, in species which feed for most of the time in winter, especially in severe weather. This suggests that a flexible policy approach to disturbance should be taken in which activities are constrained under certain conditions, but accepted when the birds do not seem to be hard pressed.

Reference cited

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Commentary by a bird watching Naturalist — 2 Lists, Records and Horsley Hills Ornithology

Dr KUMAR GHORPADE, 1861 Bethel Steet, St Thomas Town, Bangalore 560 084

Though a Checklist can never be complete and final, it must bring together all that has been recorded. It must also be noted that Bird Watching by itself is not Ornithology, though it may lead to it' (Humayun Abdulali, 1983, JBNHS 80, 202)

Rarely is an attempt made by listers to delve into published literature to search for data on an area's birds. This is the basis of what is called "research" and is critical in offering to Science the totality of the present and past status of an area's avifauna and, hopefully, of its natural history as well. I would like to inform listers of my concerned willingness to help them with complete, or almost complete, databases on the recorded Ornithology of any area in the Indian sub-continent. The skimpiest kind of bird *lists* of areas dominate the pages of the NLBW today. As random examples, let me mention those of Subba *et al.*, (NLBW 36 : 6-7; 1996), Datta (36 : 50-53), and Vidya Athreya (36 : 72-74). Athreya's article includes several spelling mistakes, while the caption for the photograph of the peacock-pheasant misinforms the reader that it is of a "Captive Peacock"! Though I much prefer reading lists with pertinent notes on each species, like those by Wesley (37 : 5-8) on the birds (51 spp) of the Thermal Camp II at Tuticorin (Tamil Nadu), even lists with numbers, names and codes as provided both by Narang and Singh (35 : 106-108) on the avifauna (146 spp) of Nauli Campus near Solan (Himachal Pradesh) and by Urfi (36 : 65-67) on the urban bird-life of Sundervan in Ahmedabad (Gujarat), provide important and interesting information to ornithologists. The precise distributions and wanderings (also migratory routes and destinations) of most of our bird species still need to be documented authentically and exhaustively, and comparisons made with lists of areas published earlier, for fluctuations due to several factors over the years, decades and century. The summarized notes on distribution, given in the likes of the New Synopsis, Pictorial Guide, Indian (compact) Handbook, Indian Birdbook, etc. are very general and imprecise. Checklists prepared carefully, and based on correct identifications, are the need of the hour, to provide critical data on the local distribution, migration, abundance, food, nesting, etc. of our birds, besides their inter-specific associations. A list of the birds of one's residential area (preferably District), made over the years, and updated each subsequent year, is the prime duty of every bird watcher who has the discipline and the interest to put pen to paper and *write* for himself, or for others, through publications like this *Newsletter*. If Mid-Winter Waterfowl Counts are attracting bird watchers to an annual 'Yatra', just think what one well-prepared checklist of each bird watcher's area would mean for our databases — on distribution, status, biology and ecology! Meaningful area lists, in their *totality*, must be printed in the NLBW, since I believe that a *full* picture is what Science requires — bits and pieces only frustrate and confound, if not also misinform.

In these Commentaries, I also intend to make observations on some other NLBW contents which include relevant 'new' records of birds. There is just one record in the NLBW (37, No.5) which I will comment on before taking up the subject of Horsley Hills Ornithology. The sighting of what Gurusami called the 'South Indian Grey-backed Shrike' (p.91) from Madras (now *Chennai*, in native tongue) carries a query by the author about the status of the shrike in this city. The identification of the species seems correct and Gurusami wrote me recently that Santharam had also confirmed it. The two most exhaustive papers on the bird-life of this present metropolis I know of are by Douglas Dewar (1905, JBNHS 16 : 484-498) who recorded 204 species from Madras, and by Alice Barnes (1938, JBNHS 40 : 467-476) who observed 80 species "in and near Tambaram" which was then "16 miles south-west of Madras city". Dewar (p.487) found "*Lanius erythronotus*" ... "not common about Madras", while Barnes (p.470) observed "The rufous-backed shrike" ... "throughout the year, in jungle and garden. Very common". Whistler and Kinneer (JBNHS, 36 : 335-337, 1933) opined that "on the east [of the Madras Presidency] it is evidently much scarcer," Walter Koelz (1947, JBNHS 47 : 133) remarked that *Lanius schach caniceps* 'is a well-marked race' and collected specimens from Kodur and Sidhout in Andhra Pradesh and from Hospet in Karnataka. I further believe that *caniceps* of Blyth, the resident (not migratory, like other subspecies of *schach*) "Peninsula representative of the group" (*teste* Whistler and Kinneer, 1933 : 336) perhaps rightly needs to be recognized as a *distinct species* (Blyth's Shrike), centered on the wetter region of the Western Ghats, but scattered in climatically suitable areas east of them. Ernst Mayr, certainly one of the 'giants' of modern ornithology, discussed the Grey-backed Shrike, *L. tephronotus* (1947, JBNHS 47 : 125-127), and Biswamoy Biswas, who learnt the ropes of bird systematics under Mayr in New York, presented an analysis of this and the *schach*-group in our sub-continent (1950, JBNHS 49 : 444-455).

The Horsley Hills, or Horsleykonda, are part of a larger biogeographical Sub-area of the Peninsula, what I have called the Eastern Ghats — Carnatic Plain, which is east of both the Western Ghats and the Deccan Plateau Sub-areas of the Peninsular Indian Sub-region of the Oriental Region. The Horsley Hills are one of the several mountain ranges scattered about in Rayalseema (a socio-cultural zone in SW Andhra Pradesh), the Old Mysore area (comprising of the Mysore Plateau south of the Varada—Tungabhadra Rivers, and including our elevated Bangalore area), and, all of Tamil nadu east of the Western Ghats. What birds occur on Horsleykonda must, logically, also frequent other hills and ranges in this Sub-area. Following this scientific reasoning about *Horsley Hills Ornithology*, I had years ago, listed some 133 species

additional to the 82 (not 83!) cited by Subramanya and Prasad (NLBW 32(9&10): 1992), most of which should be recorded in future on Horsley Hills. All of these 133 species have been documented from the Rayalseema—Andhra Carnatic zone by Whistler and Kinnear (1930, 1932-1937, JBNHS Vols. 34-39) in their Eastern Ghats Ornithological Survey report. On isolated hills in this Sub-area, altitude and vegetation are the most vital environmental factors governing the disjunct distribution of a few species of birds. Destruction or modification of moist deciduous forest has affected the continued survival of these specialized birds here. In NLBW 37(5), Prasanna, Belliappa and Vittal added nine bird species to the earlier "preliminary checklist" of 82 species from the Horsley Hills by Subramanya and Prasad. Whistler and Kinnear had documented all of these, except the ring dove, from this Eastern Ghats—Carnatic Plain Sub-area in their serial paper. Though they did not report the ring dove, they wrote that it "appears to be far less common in the Presidency than in other parts of India" (1936, JBNHS 38 : 680). Douglas Dewar (1905, JBNHS, 16 : 495) listed the ring dove, as *Turtur risorius*, without any further comment from "in and about Madras". I recorded this species on 3 December 1973 halfway up the Nandi Hills, which are only a little more than 100 km west of the Horsley Hills. Prasanna *et al.*'s, succinct notes, preceding their "Additions" list, were intelligently drafted and are worthy of praise. Crows have become opportunistic scavengers of garbage since man began altering natural habitats, which also resulted in their exploding populations, and commensal existence, in larger human settlements. House and jungle crows are excellent indicators of garbage availability (like stray dogs and cats are too), and of human waste which goes unutilized. That these *Corvus* spp. have still not built up a stable population on Horsleykonda speaks well for relative cleanliness there, and the lack of accessible human filth and refuse. The *Anthus* sp. that Subramanya and Prasad were unable to identify was more probably *A. campestris* (tawny pipit) rather than *A. similis* (Jerdon's pipit — incidentally, what was the brown rock pipit is now separated as *A. sordidus*, which breeds on the Himalayas and winters only in northern India), which occurs mainly on the Western Ghats and may rarely wander over the drier eastern plains, especially on the moister ghats? Whistler and Kinnear documented the tawny pipit from Nellore and the paddyfield pipit (*A. rufulus*) from the Palkonda and Nallamalai hill ranges. The record of a pair of black eagles by Subramanya and Prasad is another heartening testimony to Horsley Hills still retaining their 'purity'. The indisciplined wildlife-unfriendly tourist traffic must be regulated and educated, if they're not to defile and contaminate these hills.

Lastly, coming to the debate about the 'credit' for first recording the Blue-headed rock thrush from the "Eastern Ghats", I am afraid neither Iyer and Shankar nor Price can claim this distinction. Whistler and Kinnear (1932, JBNHS 36 : 79-80), in fact, published what is evidently the first record of *Monticola cinclorhynchus*, from what are at present generally considered the "Eastern Ghats". They reported a female of this species collected in the "Jeypore Agency", perhaps near Araku on the Vizag Ghats, which was the collection station at 3,000 ft altitude visited by La Personne (not Whistler and Kinnear as Subramanya and Prasad wrongly presumed!) closest to Jeypore, now in Orissa, on 21 April 1930 which "was fat and evidently on migration". They wrote that "beyond the above specimen" ... "nothing is known of the Blue-headed Rock Thrush on the eastern side of the [Madras] Presidency". Also, interestingly, Stuart Baker in his NEW FAUNA (2 : 171-172, 1924) stated that "In winter it spreads practically throughout India and West and Central Burma". This is a distinctly dissimilar summary (compare also Himmatsinhji, 1995, JBNHS 92 : 123) from that provided by Salim Ali & Ripley (1973, INDIAN HANDBOOK 9 : 67-70) who interpreted that its wintering route was through the western side of the peninsula. This latter conclusion is most certainly erroneous, since this bird breeds over the entire spread of the Himalayas, from Pakistan (even Afghanistan, *teste* Baker) to Burma, and south through the Naga, Khasi, Chin and Kachin Hills. Surely the eastern breeding population takes the *shortest* route to the Western Ghats, over eastern Peninsular India, which explains records from hilly areas here? Besides the records of Whistler and Kinnear, Price, Iyer and Shankar, and Subramanya and Prasad my bird watcher colleagues and I had reported [NLBW 14(5) : 1-5, 1974] our sightings of this thrush on the Nandi Hills, NE, of Bangalore. We saw a male halfway up the hill (1189 mt) on 25 July 1973, and then a female on the hilltop (1467 mt) on 3 December of that year. One other, as yet unpublished record I made was of a female rummaging among leaf litter left uncleared (which is an environmental *plus* horticultural tactic!) in the garden on my farm, some 14 km N E of Bangalore (13° 04' N, 77° 40' E), on 25 October 1989. All these transit wintering records from the higher areas on the eastern side of the peninsula (Bangalore is also an 'Eastern Ghat', by the way) confirm an *eastern* migratory pathway for this thrush. For the record, I may mention here that my understanding of the *true* Eastern Ghats precludes the Vizag Ghats, etc. that lie north of the Godavari River and only includes the much drier (more deciduous and less evergreen) hills *south* of this river, in the eastern portions of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

CORRESPONDENCE

OWL BELIEFS. B. VIJAYARAGHAVAN, G-89, Anna Nagar, Chennai 600 102

The note on owls by Mark Cocker in the *Guardian Weekly* No. 30, 1997 extracted in the Newsletter Vol. 38 1 & 2 Jan./Feb. 1998 refers to "Owl beliefs (which) bridge huge geographical and cultural divides". An example given is "the

perception shared between tribes people of West Africa and the Chenchu Apache of Arizona and New Mexico that the evil spell cast by an owl's visitation can be dispelled by chasing the bird off with a burning fire brand."

Readers may be interested to know that a somewhat similar superstition exists in Kerala far, far away from the places mentioned by the author. The mottled wood owl (*Strix ocellata ocellata*) is known in Kerala as *Kaalan Kozhi* or the bird of the God of Death. Its spine-chilling call at dusk and dawn used to be one of the familiar bird calls in the Kerala

villages till some 30 or 40 years ago. Now, unfortunately, with the destruction of the ancient trees in the homesteads and the denudation of the sacred groves and probably also because of the food-chain effect of the extensive use of pesticides, the bird has become uncommon.

Its call, so faithfully described by Salim Ali and Dillon Ripley as "a loud quavering, eerie *chuhua-aa*" sounds to the ears of the Malayali as "*povaa-aa*" (which can be loosely translated as 'let's go!') a summons to the other World. The belief is that the unseen bird of ill-omen can be driven away by heating a length of iron, such as a ladle, in the fire.

BLUE ROCK THRUSH ON BREAKFAST TABLE.

MUKUND THAKKAR, E/98, Chhadva Nagar, H.P.K. Marg, Kurla (W), Mumbai 400 070

On the morning of April 9, 1998 at about 7.30 a.m., I met an unusual guest in a small *dhaba* in Dajipur near Kolhapur, the village where the Radhanagri Wild Life Sanctuary is situated. A female 'blue rock thrush' came and sat on the entrance door of the hotel barely 3 feet away from me. Then it descended on the next table and sat there for a few seconds before coming down on the floor to pick up some insects. Thereafter, when persons who were sitting on one of the tables got up, the bird landed on that table to eat the leftovers (*Poha*) from the plates of those persons. The bird was sitting on that table for quite some time before flying off. When I enquired with the hotel owner, he informed that the bird comes daily there to eat the leftovers from the plates of the customers.

As per Salim Ali's 'Book of Indian Birds', the bird visits occupied dwellings also in town and villages during October to April. But its food normally consists of insects and berries. I would solicit other readers' views on any such sighting of unusual behaviour of the species.

I saw a few more interesting birds in Radhanagri WLS during my this visit. However, I was surprised with the ignorance of the forest officials there who did not have any knowledge about the birds. I gave them a combined checklist of the birds I had seen during my visits. They did not even know the altitude of the place situated on the ghat.

COMMENTS ON THE AVIAN FAUNA OF SAJJANGARH WILDLIFE SANCTUARY, RAJASTHAN.

HARKIRAT SINGH SANGHA, B-27, Gautam Marg, Hanuman Nagar, Jaipur 302 021

Avian fauna of Sajjangarh Wildlife Sanctuary in the Newsletter Vol. 38 No. 2 March/April 1998 prompts me to point out extremely doubtful records given by the author in the checklist.

The whitethroat *Sylvia communis* is notoriously difficult species to identify in the field. Since the lesser whitethroat *Sylvia curruca* is not mentioned in the checklist it appears that

the author has actually recorded the lesser whitethroat. The latter species is common and widely distributed in Rajasthan during winter.

Barnes's chat *Oenanthe finschii* - The record is obviously erroneous. The chat is a winter visitor to Baluchistan. Obviously it has been confused with the pied chat *Oenanthe picata*. The latter is not mentioned in the checklist although it is commonly seen in winter throughout Rajasthan.

It will not be out of place to point out that the above records were included in the Birds of South Rajasthan also by the same author (Newsletter Vol. 34 No. 5 Sept/Oct. 1994). Thus the errors have been perpetuated from list to list.

SIGHTING OF BLACKCAPPED KINGFISHER *Halcyon pileata* IN MELGHAT TIGER RESERVE, MAHARASHTRA.

ASHISH KOTHARI, Aptmt. 5, Shree Dutta Krupa, 908 Deccan Gymkhana, Pune 411004, Maharashtra, India

The blackcapped kingfisher *Halcyon pileata* is essentially a maritime bird, found along virtually the entire coastline of India, and in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The *Handbook* (Ali and Riley 1983 : 283) notes that it "penetrates much deeper inland along the larger rivers and their feeders" and has been seen sporadically in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Assam, and Manipur. Not much is known, it appears, about its breeding in such inland areas.

On the morning of 29th January, 1998, I observed an individual blackcapped kingfisher in Melghat Tiger Reserve, Vidarbha region, Maharashtra (over 500 km, from the coast as the crow flies). The bird was sitting on a branch overlooking the river below Kholkaz Rest House.

The species has apparently been sighted only twice before in Melghat (January to April in 1995 and again in the same period in 1996), both times by Prachi Mehta of the Wildlife Institute of India. It may be interesting to observe the species more systematically in Melghat, to see if it nests there. Mehta (personal communication) notes that only two nesting records are reported from India, "one by Abdulali (1945) near Sharavaty river in Mysore and the other by Stewart from Travancore". Both these sites are much closer to the coast than Melghat. Since the breeding season starts in March, it may well be breeding here. Taej Mundkur of Wetlands International reports that ornithologists in South-East Asia have reported its food habits as being very diverse (dragonflies, water boatmen, bees, large wasps, beetles, grasshoppers, and occasionally fish), which might explain why it survives far inland.

The local Range Officer at Melghat has volunteered to observe the site over the next few days and report if he continues to see the species. I would like to know from readers if they have any further information to add which could indicate the residential status of this species in Melghat (or, for that matter, in central India).

I also saw, at the same site, a pair of black storks *Ciconia nigra*, which are supposed to be rare in the Deccan Peninsula (Ali and Repley 1983 : 26). However, Kishore Rithe of the

Amravati Nature Conservation Society, who was with me in Melghat (though not when I saw the above two birds), reports that he has seen them in larger numbers at wetlands in Amravati district. This may be worth following up.

References

Ali, S. and Ripley, S. Dillon. 1983. *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan : Compact Edition*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Email communication from Prachi Mehta, Wildlife Institute of India (4 February, 1998), and Taej Mundkur, Wetlands International (9 February, 1998).



REDBREASTED PARAKEETS. ANISH P. ANDHERIA, 2, Sagar Building, V. P. Road, Andheri (West), Mumbai 400 058

The redbreasted parakeets are very much a part and parcel of my neighbourhood. They are easy to observe due to their vociferous nature and I see them almost every day on the *Michelia champaca* tree near my house. In fact, their number has also risen to approx. 25. It is quite clear that they have adapted themselves excellently to this alien environment. The question that constantly haunts me is regarding the effect of such accidental introduction of a bird species on the native varieties which compete with them for food (esp. the rose ringed parakeet). There is a possibility that they have begun spreading in other parts of the city as I've heard of another small flock near Thane city (not confirmed). I would like readers to throw some light on this.



BIRDING ON SUNDAY MORNINGS. Mrs. PRAGATI NAYAK, Aashirwad, Sampe, P. O. Aryapu, Puttur 574 210

If you remember, I did mention in a previous letter to you that we have a small wooden birdhouse in our garden. A pair of magpie robins are nesting in it at present. They had just begun to build the nest a few weeks ago when I happened to pass by it one day. The male bird flew past my head and settled in a perch outside the house, with a couple of twigs in his beak. I stopped to watch and he stiffened at my presence. And then he did something I found really strange - he began to sing while still holding the twigs in his beak!

Whether he was calling to his mate to keep clear of the house because danger lurked nearby or whether he was trying to make me believe that he was simply passing the time of day and not nesting at all, I don't know. He kept calling while all the time holding the twigs in the beak, making mincemeat of the old Fox and the crow fable. I stood as still as possible trying to blend with the scenery but the bird would have none of it. He turned his back on me and continued to sing, occasionally looking over his shoulder at me, willing me to go away. Finally tiring of standing in the sun, I went indoors, so what I want to ask is — is it normal for a bird to be able to sing freely with its beak full?

There are plenty of tailor birds around my house. Sometimes whole flocks of them get terribly excited and create a dreadful din, jumping and hopping about for no apparent reason, and then suddenly stop. Why do they do this? I haven't seen any predator or anything near them while they create the noise and confusion.

Another thing I want to discuss is Sunday mornings. In the article — Stopping by the woods on a Sunday morning — which appeared in the Nov-Dec 1997 issue of the Newsletter, Dr Salim Ali ends by saying "... how few are there who will sacrifice their Sunday morning sleep." I'm sure most lovers of the outdoors are early risers and certainly it's a rare birdwatcher indeed who is not an early riser and who has to "sacrifice" his Sunday morning sleep. I feel so strongly about Sunday mornings that I simply cannot resist writing to you about it. I am one birdwatcher who waits all week for Sunday mornings.

As a homemaker, I can hardly call the morning my own on weekdays. But on Sundays Everyone is a late riser in my family (excluding myself) who like to sleep even later on Sundays. So on Sunday, I slip out of the house as soon as it gets reasonably light and spend the next two hours in the blissful company of the birds. As I mentioned in the previous letter all my birdwatching is done around my house. I simply grab my binoculars and walk around drinking in the beauty of the early morning. Of course I see the same species of birds from one Sunday to another but the joy never lessens. Now and then when I see a bird which is not a regular visitor, my day is really made — an Indian pitta or a white-headed myna or a paradise flycatcher, or a Lotens sunbird or chestnut-headed bee eaters or black-headed munias etc. etc. I am in paradise when I sit alone with the birds, knowing that I am not needed in the kitchen just now. Everybody is asleep and I can simply sit here with the birds for as long as I like. I love Sunday mornings.



MISCELLANEOUS NOTES. S. ASHOK KUMAR IAS (Retd.) Plot No. 491, Road No. 10, Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad 500 034 — (Accompanied by S L BANSAL)

I. Breeding of the coot (*Fulica atra* Linn)

During the 1998 Asian Waterfowl Count on 30.1.1998 in Gangavaram lake, situated 25 kms south-east of Hyderabad city, I observed a group of 20 sub-adult coots swimming amidst the adult birds numbering 200+. Obviously this lake is a breeding ground for coots. The earlier breeding record further south was from Kazipet made by N R Nadarajan, P A Azeez and C R Ajithkumar (August 1993, JBNHS 90 : 289).

II. Sunbathing by Sub-adult painted storks (*Mycteria leucocephala*)

During a visit to the National Zoological Park, New Delhi on 10th January 1998, my friend SL Bansal and I noticed a few painted storks and sub-adult birds near their nests on *Acacia nilotica* trees in the Nilgai enclosure. Covered with a brown coat on their head and neck, the sub adults were facing the sun with outstretched wings. We watched them for nearly 15 to 20 minutes and it appeared that they were sunbathing in the chill morning hours.

III. Whitebreasted kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis* Linn) Feeding on a checkered keelback water snake

While walking along trail No.3 in L-Block of Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur on 13th January 1998 we chanced to see a whitebreasted kingfisher landing on a Kadam tree branch with its prey. Focussing our binoculars we could clearly see the bird firmly holding a small sized checkered Keelback Water snake (*Xenochrophis piscator*). Soon after, the bird started smashing its prey against the branch and devour it slowly.

IV. Jackal with its kill in Keoladeo National park, Bharatpur

While proceeding on trail No.2 to Python point on 14th January 1998 in Keoladeo National park, Bharatpur, we saw a jackal skulking away with a pond heron (*Ardeola grayii*) in its mouth.

V. Dead peahen (*Pavo cristatus*) Feasted upon by treepies (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*)

While on the road on the chill winter morning on 20th January 1998 in Ranthambore Tiger Reserve, we came across a leopard kill, a peahen which was being feasted upon by a number of tree pies.



MORE THAN 70,000 TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*) SIGHTED AGAIN ON THE RIVER GANGES, MALDA DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL. ARUNAYAN SHARMA, Green Peoples India, Pranta Pally, P.O. & Dist Malda 732 101, West Bengal

For the Waterfowl Census 1998, in our district Malda, on 23rd January, 1998, I went to Farakka Barrage to count waterfowl on behalf of "Green Peoples India".

Farakka Barrage constructed over the river Ganges, connects two adjacent districts Malda and Murshidabad both by road and railway on National Highway 34. The overall span of the Barrage is 1200 m. The Barrage is strictly protected because it is the only one of the kind in our country, and is situated in a border district. Through this distribution system water is given to our neighbouring country Bangladesh from time to time.

At around 08.15 hours during the counting I saw twelve large flocks of tufted duck (*Aythya fuligula*) resting on the river Ganges, a few were very near to the river banks. I counted them from the river bank of malda, several times, each group separately. Again, I walked down to the opposite river bank side (Murshidabad). Counting from both the sides, the total number of ducks recorded were 70,000+. The numbers were more than what I recorded during the last waterfowl census (1997) in our district. Last time I recorded about 50,000 tufted duck (NLBW, 37(4) : 65) from the same place on 30 January 1997.



ON A LARGE CONGREGATION OF NORTHERN LAPWINGS *Vanellus vanellus* IN KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK, ASSAM. MAAN BARUA, "Barua Bhavan", 107, M.C. Road, Uzan Bazaar, Guwahati 781 001, Assam

On 16 November 1997, I conducted the annual Salim Ali Bird Count in the Eastern (Agaratoli) Range of Kaziranga National Park (26° 35' - 26° 45' N and 93° 05' - 93° 40' E). At about 12 hrs 30, while counting waterfowl at Shola Beel (an ox-bow lake) I came across a few medium-sized waders, which I identified as Northern lapwings *Vanellus vanellus*. As I approached nearer, the birds took to flight and I gauged there were at least a hundred birds in the flock. They landed a few metres ahead among some more birds of the same species. On closer observation I estimated that there were about 400 individuals in the flock ! They were foraging in short grass (mainly *Haemarthia compressa* grazed by herbivores such as Asiatic Water Buffalo *Bubalus bubalis* and Indian One-horned Rhino *Rhinoceros unicornis*. All birds I observed in detail were in winter plumage, the black band on the breast being easily noticeable.

According to Ali and Ripley (Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan. Vol. 2 : 210-211) the Northern lapwing is a winter visitor to the Indian Sub-continent and "keeps in pairs or scattered flocks". I have encountered small flocks of 10-15 birds regularly in Kaziranga during the last five years in the Park. The largest number recorded by me was in the same area on 14 November 1995 when I saw c 60 birds together. There is a record of c 200 Northern lapwings in Burha-Chapori WLS during the winter of 1993-1994 (Manideep Raj and Soumen Das verbally). However, a large concentration of c 400 birds is exceptional and to the best of my knowledge, has not been recorded in northeastern India before.



RECURRENCE OF YELLOW-LEGGED GREEN PIGEON AND BARN OWL IN GWALIOR. DR. RAJIV SAXENA, M-853, Darpan Colony, Thatipur, Gwalior 474 011 (M.P.)

The distribution of yellow-legged green pigeon *Treron phoenicoptera* and barn owl *Tyto alba* covers the entire Indian subcontinent, the latter being a universal bird. But their place-wise distribution and abundance is not exactly known. In Gwalior (26° 14' N - 78° 16' E) in north-west Madhya Pradesh, they have never been common. Upto 1982, they were sometimes sighted in densely wooded areas in and around Gwalior. Since then I have not seen them in the six districts namely, Morena, Bhind, Gwalior, Datia, Shivpuri and Guna, during my numerous visits to these places.

Their disappearance from Gwalior may be attributed to the cutting down of a large number of trees including *Ficus* spp. to clear the land to construct large residential colonies and broaden the roads.

During our fortnightly birdwatching trip, in the cool morning of 5th October 1997, I saw nearly 150 yellow-legged green pigeons coming out in ones and twos from inside a Peepal tree standing behind the agriculture nursery along the Race Course Road in Gwalior. Since then they have been sighted twice again.

In the second week of Dec. 1997, a sick barn owl was found along the main MLB Road. It had a broken wing and a wound in the back. It was taken to Gwalior Zoo for treatment.

Sighting of these two species again after a gap of 15 years is a happy sign. If the remaining trees are saved, these birds may survive.



GREYNECKED BUNTING *Emberiza buchanani* SIGHTED IN SOUTH EAST RAJASTHAN. RAKESH VYAS, ANIL NAIR, 2 P 22, Vigyan Nagar, Kota 324 005, Rajasthan

Recently during the wetlands survey near Kota in south east Rajasthan (25° 10' N Latitude, 75° 52' E Longitude), a pair of greynecked buntings *Emberiza buchanani* was seen feeding in a stony scrub country by the roadside about 16 kms south of Kota. The grey head and neck, rufous breast and belly with a prominent white eye ring distinguished it from other similar looking and likely birds of the region. The bill and the legs were pink and the birds were feeding on grass seeds under a *Ber Ziziphus* bush. Both the birds were very confiding and we could watch them closely from a distance of about 5 meters.

This sighting acquires significance in view of the fact that the greynecked bunting does not find a place in the checklists of the birds of Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur and Karera Bustard Sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh, two of the reference points close to Kota for which detailed records are available. According to the checklist of the birds of Delhi, Agra and Bharatpur (Abdulali & Panday, 1978) greynecked buntings have been recorded only from Delhi region and that too very infrequently. Dr. A.R. Rahmani has not included this bird in the checklist of the birds of Karera Bustard Sanctuary (Rahmani, 1991).

Unlike redheaded and blackheaded buntings, greynecked buntings do not form large flocks and may be seen in small parties of 8-20 birds during the winter months and in pairs during the spring migration. We could not find more birds of the species, besides the pair in the locality. The bird is so distinctive that it is difficult to miss it in the field, so is it possible that it has again become a rare winter visitor to western and central India, where it was once found (Ali & Ripley, 1983).

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THE NAWABS AND BIRDS OF JUNAGADH. A.K. CHAKRAVARTHY, Entomologist, UAS, GKVK, Bangalore 560 065, and N.A. PRAKASH

Gardens and open spaces are badly missing from our cities today. It would be a very different world if gardens are provided as habitats for birds. The Nawabs of Junagadh settled in Pakistan but by 1948 left behind 158 palatial buildings, the havelis in Junagadh. Havelis had well maintained gardens with enough open spaces around. After 1948, havelis were converted to government buildings and today only 8 of them have gardens!

Birds were observed with a 8 x 30 binoculars during December 1997 for four days in 'Mohabat Vilas' a haveli which had a partially managed garden (about 2 acres) with *Acalypha*, *Polyalthia*, *Bougainvillea*, *Albizia*, *Dalbergia*, *Ziziphus*, *Acacia*, bamboos, Coconut, citrus and creepers.

Wheech.....Wheech.... Witch screams from a top of the Palmyra palm revealed a nesting pair of black ibis (*Pseudibis papillosa*). A redstart was found moving and perching from branch to branch in shade by characteristically shivering the tail and bobbing the head, up and down. Two peafowls (*Pavo cristatus*) were noticed warily and silently ground foraging along the hedge. The most noisy of the common birds were the six flocks of the jungle babbler, (*Turdoides striatus*). Sixteen individuals of the berry feeding species, redvented bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*) were commonly encountered.

In addition, paradise flycatcher (1), tailor bird (1), black drongo (4), pariah kite (1), koel (2), grey partridge (2), spotted munia (6), Indian roller (2), common bee-eater (6), jungle crow (2), magpie robin (1), spotted dove (3), little brown dove (2), roseringed parakeet (2), coucal (2), bank mynas, house sparrows and in all 24 bird species were sighted. Sixteen species were sighted in another haveli with about half-an-hectare garden called 'Mangal Nivas'. However, in havelis without gardens like, *Sashi Kunj*, *Uma Vilas*, *Sardar Bagh* and *Moti Bagh* only blue rock pigeons were sighted.

This observation shows that birds cannot thrive in open spaces alone. Garden and open space together formed a complex barrier against the destructive forces and factors and created a safe, sheltered habitat for a number of bird species. Without gardens and open space, only species which adapt well to urbanization like pigeons, increase. Much of the birdlife in Junagadh can be made 'alive' by planting herbs, shrubs and trees around havelis and restore a part of the legacy of the Nawabs.

Figures in brackets are number of each species.



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Cover : Male Purple Sunbird (*Nectarinia asiatica*) prospecting for a nesting site. A lively tiny bird with a curved beak and a long tubular tongue, specially adapted for probing for nectar into flowers of a wide variety of trees and shrubs. Plays an important role in cross pollination. Male's song is a series of jubilant notes *cheewit... cheewit...* rendered repeatedly two to six times from a favorite perch, while the bird pivots from side to side with wings lowered and displaying the brilliant crimson & yellow pectoral tufts.

Photo : S. Sridhar, ARPS